

Testimony from House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer

House Committee on Natural Resources, Hearing on the Political Status of Puerto Rico

April 14, 2021

Mr. HOYER. “Chairman Grijalva and Ranking Member Westerman, thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts with the Committee regarding the political status of Puerto Rico, which has been a very important priority for me throughout my time in Congress.

“For generations, Puerto Ricans have been an integral part of the American family, and millions of people born in Puerto Rico or of Puerto Rican heritage. The 3.2 million people living on the island are our fellow American citizens, and they contribute mightily to our common defense, and the social and cultural life of our nation. Puerto Rico’s fragile economy, still in the midst of restructuring unsustainable levels of debt, has been hit hard by recent hurricanes, earthquakes, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and the prior Administration did not live up to its responsibility to extend help to our brothers and sisters on the island during their time of hardship and recovery. That was unfortunate, because it does not reflect what I believe is a deeply genuine sense of common purpose and common destiny that binds Puerto Rico to the rest of the United States. We take care of one another.

“While Puerto Rico is served ably in Congress by my dear friend, the Resident Commissioner Jenniffer González Colón, can any of us truly say Puerto Rico would have been treated this poorly in the wake of these disasters had it been a state and afforded full representation in Washington? The answer is self-evident.

“I believe that the best path forward to resolve questions of Puerto Rico’s political status is statehood, but that is a decision that must be left to Puerto Ricans themselves. I have long supported statehood for the people of Puerto Rico, but more importantly I believe in their right to self-determination. The people of Puerto Rico deserve the opportunity to chart their own future, and in my view, the people of Puerto Rico have told us time and time again, through multiple plebiscites in recent years, that they choose statehood. As recently as this past November, the people of Puerto Rico chose statehood in a simple up or down vote. I think that we in Congress would be wise to listen to what the people of Puerto Rico are telling us.

“Statehood would afford the people living on the island all the rights, privileges, responsibilities, and equal treatment under federal programs that the current fifty states enjoy – everything from application of the federal minimum wage to access to Medicaid, supplemental nutrition assistance, and countless other federal programs. Most importantly, the people of Puerto Rico would have a greater say in determining the course of our nation’s future, with equal representation in the Congress, including two senators, and a role in choosing our national leaders.

“With a population greater than twenty of the U.S. states, there ought to be no impediment to admitting Puerto Rico as a state if they choose that course. To my friends on the other side of the aisle, who might presume from the outset what political party the people of Puerto Rico might favor in electing their representatives to the Congress, I would remind them that we were certain with the admission of Hawaii and Alaska to the Union that Hawaii would reliably elect

Republicans and Alaska would be a stronghold for Democrats. Only the people of Puerto Rico will know the answer to that question. As my friend Rep. Don Young can attest, we ought to be careful about making decisions about the merits of the legislation before the Committee today with those presumptions in mind.

“Our history with the people of Puerto Rico is complex, with over a century of their mistreatment as second-class citizens. It is time to right that wrong.

“I thank the Committee for holding this hearing today and for considering bills introduced by my dear friends Reps. Velázquez and Soto. I hope the Committee will give a full and fair hearing to their respective pieces of legislation on the future of Puerto Rico’s political status, and I appreciate the many efforts they have taken to craft their bills with care. I apologize that a prior commitment prevented me from being with you today in person, and I look forward to reading the statements of testimony and transcripts from this hearing – in addition to looking forward to continuing our work together in the Congress to ensure that Puerto Ricans have their voices heard loudly and clearly in this House as we address matters important to our common future.”